VEILED IN FLESH
Matthew 1:~~18-25~~ 1:-6, 16, 18-25
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Most religion seems to end up as an effort to deliver us from, or at least deny, our humanity. Sometimes it is carried off in the most sophisticated theological jargon imaginable, and what seem to be for the very best of reasons. But somehow it comes out sounding as if our humanity is so flawed, so sinful, so totally depraved, something or someone has to deliver us from it. (In order to save us.) The expressions of this elemental religious impulse range all the way from the ancient monastic conclusion that a life of self-denial is morally superior, that celibacy ~~is better than sexuality~~, for instance, a basic denial of our humanness must be a better state than a wholesome expression of our sexuality. It finds expression in that stereotypical ~~to the~~ Puritan position that joviality is suspicious: ~~someone once defined~~ (A Puritan has been defined, you know,) as one who is afraid that someone, somewhere is having too much fun. It finds current expression in ~~the~~ the relentless tendency of popular religion to focus the action elsewhere; ~~the kind that~~ fills the radio waves & TV channels to portray the sins of the flesh so vividly that one is never sure whether to be appalled or entranced — and to present finally ~~a~~ enormously popular religious life insurance called "pie in the sky by and by." Religion seems to be for the purpose of turning our gaze away from the world.

In this context, Christians are always at a disadvantage as soon as they have to think about their basic claim - that Jesus of Nazareth, God's full disclosure, was a human being. If our humanity is so flawed, after all, how could it possibly be the setting for Incarnation, for the ~~in~~-flesh-ing of God? Most incarnation talk focuses on the incredible mystery of deity becoming human. But at Christmas, at least, the tilt is in the other direction entirely. The real shocker

is not that God could do it, but that our humanity was once the vehicle for God's revelation - and perhaps still is. The marvelous and wildly improbable dimension of a Christian Christmas is in what it says about our humanity, ~~which has been so marvelously blessed by God.~~ Christmas radically affirms the world - not as the place where all the evil lies, but the place God so loves he sent his son to live in it. Christmas radically affirms our humanity, not as a condition from which we must be delivered, but as the ~~way~~ it God chose to demonstrate his holy love. Christmas profoundly embraces human life.

Matthew understood that, it appears, before anyone else. Mark, who wrote first, begins with John the Baptist and the man Jesus meeting at the Jordan River. The Gospel according to John begins magnificently, profoundly, ~~philosophically:~~ "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God...and the Word was made flesh." ~~and then on to the thirty-year old Jesus.~~

Matthew begins in a way very few preachers chose for a text, with that most human, most mundane of all objects, a family picture album, a family tree, home movies..."The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David,

the Son of Abraham...Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob;" that long and curious list of begats in the older translations, which set generations of youngsters to snickering, thinking about all that "begatting" ...an odd list of people, some of whom are mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, through David the King right up to the greatgrandparents and the grandparents, and "Joseph, husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born."

Matthew, it appears, wants there to be no doubt that this is a very human story. The family album is not full of mystics, contemplatives, ~~priests~~ + saints, but full blooded men and women, some of whom ~~are~~ were rascals, cheats, liars, murderers, a prostitute or two and David the King, who the author reminds us, ("was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah")- ~~the Uriah David arranged to have killed~~. It is a very human list. Matthew wants no doubt about the full humanity of Jesus of Nazareth.

If was quite a family!

The story of the birth itself, as presented by Matthew reflects the same determined effort to celebrate the humanness of it all, not ~~to~~ hide it. It pulls us in again to a very human saga with one finely crafted sentence. ."When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit;

and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." That's a sentence literally crammed with humanness: complex cultural marriage customs, regional variations in the customs, religious rules, and deeply human emotions; love and passion and jealousy, and humiliation, and fairness, and courage, and faith. You have to read chapters in the commentaries to get a handle on that verse.

$ Let's pause and learn a bit about the human complexity..

"Betrothed" refers to a step in the three stage, Jewish matrimonial procedure of the day. The first step was a formal exchange of consent before witnesses between a man and a young girl's family. The young woman ordinarily would be 12 or 13 years old. The step is called "betrothal," but sometimes it is called marriage. Stage two is a period of waiting - a year or so. In some places the bride and groom could be together once, intimately, during that time. ~~Not the Galilee, I learned~~. Stage three is the taking of the bride to the groom's family home. ("Marriage") can refer to the beginning of the proces - or the end. Betrothal means the first step. During step two, the waiting period, Mary is pregnant. In more strict times she could be tried, punished for adultery. Joseph is just: there is no question what he must do. The scandal will be awful. ~~But~~ He doesn't want the shame of public accusation and so it will be a quick and quiet divorce.

The law regarded betrothed people as fully married -

while they are betrothed

he must divorce Mary.

But could

that doesn't mean he is soft, it means

experienced by ascetic monk living in isolation. If wasn't a burning bush, or mighty wind. It was neither mystical experience nor marvelous natural phenomenon

Matthew means for us to know from the outset that the incarnation was not a flash of mystical vision but an utterly human story: that, therefore, it doesn't require religious sophistication to understand: that, surely, it doesn't require moral perfection to be appreciated. It is a story about people like people we know: people like us. It is a story about this humanity, this flesh, this person - the object of God's saving love. That's why it is so good.

I borrowed the title Veiled in the Flesh from the late J. Harry Cotton, former Senior Minister of this church, who preached a series of sermons here under that title in 1965 when he was serving as interim pastor. Dr. Cotton, of course, borrowed the phrase from Charles Wesley in his carol - "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." The sermons are good: there is a sense of distillation about them: a long and effective ministry now focusing on the essentials. The humanity of Christ is always the theological issue, Harry Cotton wrote. And for us, people trying to be faithful, the life issue is something he called "Christian Humanism," a generation before Jerry Falwell and his friends on the far right appropriated and despoiled the word and the concept. Any Gospel worth our attention must begin with who we are: must take our humanity very seriously: must incorporate our human life: our relationships; our hopes and fears, our needs, our joys, our hurts, our birthing and loving and our dying.

6a. Insert

Bishop John A T Robinson died last week. He stirred up the Christian world ~~in the~~ 20 years ago with his book Honest to God, one of the truly important theological works of our life. Robinson was irreverent but honest - and about Incarnation he spoke for many when he identified the traditional concept as ["God Almighty walking around on earth, dressed up as a man..." However gardedly it may be stated," Robinson observed, "the traditional view leaves the impression that God took a space-trip & arrived on this planet in the form of a man." [P66 Honest to God]

6b. You see if you can ignore — or at least minimise the humanity of Jesus, you can be rid of Christianity's power. If he wasn't as human as you and me then when he was crucified it didn't really break either his heart or his body. And when he died on the cross he didn't really die. Therefore when he said 'love your enemies' it wasn't an authentically human idea, etc. etc. You see where that leads — to insipidness, the irrelevance of otherworldly religion.

Cotton was reminded of the scholarly observation that the first Christian heresy was a denial of Jesus' humanity. He only seemed human, it was said. Thus, he didn't hurt, get angry, hungry, tired, lusty - God forbid! ~~And when he was crucified it didn't break either his body or his heart, and when he died he had not really died.~~ It is a comfortable heresy, very civilized actually. It solves a lot of problems and absolves us from the responsibility of dealing with our ~~commonality with Jesus~~ discipleship. It ~~is a~~ tidy ~~heresy. And it reinforces that elemental religious impulse~~ to deliver us from our humanness and to locate the actions somewhere else.

Of course it also deprives Christianity of part of what God apparently had in mind in sending Jesus Christ in the first place; namely to reconcile us with our humanity: to grace our humanness by becoming one of us so that we can be who we are fully. ~~Eighteenth century British poeet, artist and mystic William Blake said plainly:~~

> "All Bibles and sacred codes have been the cause of the following errors: that body energy is evil; and soul thought is good: that God will punish eternally for following his energies."

and live in this world with some sense of wholeness + security + freedom.

What we celebrate this week is the very essence of all Judeo/Christian religion: that God has come to us: become one of us: graced all human life and therefore our human life with ~~his~~ divine life. What we celebrate truly is not our deliverance from this world of the flesh but God's blessing of the world and ~~the flesh~~ humanity with the life of his son. What we celebrate is God becoming particular, specific, identifiable, touchable, vulnerable, God's humanity, Karl Barth once called the Christmas Gospel.

The hints are there early. Hans Kung wrote: "From the first to the last page of the Bible there is talk not only about God, but constantly to and with God, praising and complaining, begging and protesting..." (On Being a Christian, p. 304)

The best minds we have produced have struggled with ways to say it so the rest of us would understand. Sometimes the theology of the classroom does it. ~~Peter Hawkins, Yale Divinity School, for~~ instance:

> "The transcendent God, who made all things that are made, Himself became a creature - a creature in His own creation - revealing in a finite human nature the God no one has ever seen." (see Yale Divinity School Symposium on Creation)

And sometimes it is the nuances and symbols of drama. There is an incandescent moment in "The Elephant Man" when the fashionable Mrs. Kenwick reaches out to and clasps the ~~repulsive and~~ deformed hand of Merrick. That's what God did ~~- not that we are repulsive - but that God~~, in love, ~~touched and embraced us, exactly as we are~~.

It's a powerful + redemptive moment. + does!

touches + embraces us, exactly as we are

Professor Hawkins observes, wisely, "for one who believes in the mystery of the word made flesh, the profoundly human is precisely the place where the creature encounters the creator - the place where God meets us, although usually without being recognized or even believe in." (op. cit.)

I continue to learn, the mystery of the Word made flesh, the

And sometimes, the incarnation is expressed and celebrated ~~autobiographically.~~ at just those times and places when we are most accutely aware of our own humanness. ~~At birth and death: at sickness, at robust, lusty life, in grief and ineestacy.~~ A good friend told me that Jesus' humanity envolved from intelletual ~~construct~~ concept to healing power when, for the first time in her life, she had to endure relentless, overpowering, post-surgical pain, and the crucifix on the wall spoke of a Lord who knew what that was about.

of the hospital room

At the edges of life, the extremities where our experience our humanity, our aliveness must vividly ; at birth - and at death, for instance : | at critical illness and at life ~~at fullest blossom~~ its lusty, robust best : | in depths of grief and on the mountain of ecstacy.

In her reflections on her own life Madeleine L'Engle has a great deal to teach about the life of all of us, and the life of the spirit. She is an unembarrassed and unapologetic parent and grandparent. I read the following, at the sea shore, while pondering that personal miracle of miracles - one's own children. L'Engle wrote: "There is no more beautiful witness to the word made flesh than a baby's naked body. I remember with sensory clarity sitting with one of my babies on my lap and running my hand over the incredibly pure smoothness of the bare back and thinking that any mother (father/parent?) holding her (a) child thus, must have at least an echo of what it is like to be Mary that in touching the particular created matter, flesh, of our child, we are touching the incarnation." (Circle of Quiet, p. 243)

The goodness of Christmas, communicated ~~- I believe~~ even to those who are not believers, is that the world, our home, is affirmed because it was also a home for God's son. The goodness, which gets itself communicated in all sorts of ways, is that our institutions; our homes, our parenting, our mothering and fathering and brothering and sistering, are blessed by reason of God's own son having been born and loved and nurtured in them. The goodness, which ~~I believe because I have seen it~~, is contageous and

~~infectious~~ is that our relationships, those vulnerably human efforts to touch one another and be with one another - are blessed and graced with healing possibility because God's Christ - entered them, enjoyed them.

The goodness of this week is that it is about God veiled in the flesh, with the accent on the flesh, our life, our humanity, ~~so loved by God~~. The goodness is the wonderful humanness of it all, from Matthew's marvelous family album to that most human event of all, cradled in simple words, yet words we know instinctively are ~~about~~ us - "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way..." AMEN.